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Invasion of the Water Plants

In a scene that sounds about as believable as "The Eggplant that Ate Chicago," the Bay State is slowly being overrun by imported species of invasive water plants.

If the roadsides and local ponds looked more colorful this summer, with broad expanses of tall purple spikes, you can credit — or curse — the incursion of the common *Lythrum Salicaria*, known in these parts as purple loosestrife. Loosestrife is an opportunistic plant that was carried from Europe, where it does have natural predators. In New England, loosestrife has no predators and takes to swampy areas, roadside sloughs and area lakes and ponds like a sort of purple wildfire. It's pretty and hardy, which means that many people don't view it as a threat until it chokes out older vegetation and begins its slow but steady encroachment on the water itself.

Loosestrife is by no means the only introduced plant species that is causing problems in recreation areas and headaches for waterfront property owners. Residents of some towns have been wrestling with the problem of controlling the spread of choking water chestnuts, lily pads and duck weed. As towns in our area have come to protect and cherish their waterways and conservation areas in recent years, techniques used in the past — dredging, draining or use of herbicides — have fallen out of favor as ways to control rampant plant growth.

Expensive weed harvesters are used today to pull out masses of water plants and in some cases, water chestnut rosettes — the cluster of plants about to release their nutlets, or seeds — are plucked out by hand, a very labor-intensive measure.

The fact that town ponds, rivers and nature areas are being slowly but constantly changed and often choked by invasive plants may not seem like a problem worth noting by many people. But the gradual filling-in of town swimming, boating and fishing areas is one that does need to be studied and addressed in some fashion.

The first step in all this is a town-by-town study of these invasive plants, where the problems are occurring, how they are affecting recreational use and wildlife habitat. In many cases these incursions are just part of the natural forces at work, filling in shallow ponds over time, despite the best efforts of townspeople or scientists. In other cases, a combination of mechanical harvesting, biological controls and public education can work to keep some of these species in check.